

Smoke and Fire: Autoethnographic Expression in Early 20th Century Latvian Literature

Benedikts Kalnačs

In this article I discuss the cultural and social scene in Latvia at the turn of the twentieth century with a focus on the literary work of Rūdolfs Blaumanis (1863–1908), one of the most important Latvian authors of the period and, more specifically, his play *In the Fire* (*Ugunī*, 1905). In order to delve into the complex aesthetic nature and important social implications of this literary work, the methodology of postcolonial studies and new historicism is especially relevant.

The moment in time when the play was written and staged coincided with dramatic social upheavals throughout the Russian Empire. This was seen especially in the economically better developed Baltic provinces. Blaumanis' play, where the events unfold at a rural manor, is often considered to provide one of the most fascinating love stories in the history of Latvian literature, and seemingly has little to do with large scale social events. Traditional interpretations of this work focus on psychological nuances in the relationship between the maid, Kristīne, and the groom, Edgars, set against the rural background of a Baltic German manor. Nevertheless, the play provides a historical cross-section of Baltic society, and the characters in the drama not only bear marks of the particular historical moment, but are also deeply rooted in its prehistory, and can only be treated with the scrutiny deserved if broader social contexts are taken into consideration. This article will examine these contexts and their representation in the play.

The importance of the circulation of social energies relevant to a dramatic conflict is one of the main theses in the methodology of new historicism. This sees culture as text, including both the interpretation of canonic literary works and the particularization of seemingly minor details of everyday reality, and popular forms of their representation. Even if the emphasis in this article is on the literary text, and the opportunities provided by reading 'between the lines', I find the views of Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt useful:

We are intensely interested in tracking the social energies that circulate very broadly through a culture, flowing back and forth between margins and center, passing from zones designated as art to zones apparently indifferent or hostile to

art, pressing up from below to transform exalted spheres and down from high to colonize the low. (2000: 13)

The concept of *autoethnographic expression* used in the title of this article comes from the work of Mary Louise Pratt when dealing with travel writing and its imagery as a means of exploration of the relations between the colonizers and the colonized. In her study Pratt focuses upon the interplay of different perspectives, and points out in particular her interest in the mechanisms of a native culture's appropriation and transformation of colonial narratives. As she puts it, 'important historical transitions alter the way people write, because they alter people's experiences and the way people imagine, feel and think about the world they live in' (Pratt 2008: 4).

One of the important issues for Pratt's work is, then, provided by what she calls 'autoethnographic expression', or 'autoethnography', a term which the author explains as follows:

This term in either form refers to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are texts the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations. (2008: 9)

Autoethnographic expression is especially relevant in the context of the so-called decolonial turn which 'has long existed in different ways, opposing what could be called the colonizing turn in Western thought' (Maldonado-Torres, 2011: 1). In the scholarly work of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group a link between modernity and coloniality is established; in these scholars' opinion, the fifteenth century discovery of America provided the formative event in the construction of Western European identity, thus also indirectly paving the way for the much later search for 'decolonial option' (Mignolo 2011). Changes in the understanding of the geographical formation of the world as interpreted by Europeans took an even more radical shape during the Enlightenment. At that time the juxtaposition of developed and underdeveloped cultures also influenced the perception of the so-called Baltic provinces of the Russian empire. The historical twelfth century arrival to, and subsequent colonization of, the Baltic lands by German knights was explicitly discussed as forming a parallel to the discovery of America (Plath 2011: 275) and dealt with in the wider context of German colonial fantasies (Zantop 1997, Plath 2011: 272). Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, despite the abandonment of serfdom in the provinces in the 1810s, the local Latvian and Estonian population of the Baltic provinces, historically referred to as "non-Germans" ("undeutsche"), formed the subaltern strata of society.

The present article discusses power relations and ideological constructions relevant to the historical contexts of colonial relationships in the Baltic area. It

also deals with the attempts of subaltern people to regain their rights and personal integrity, or, in other words, to find ways of ‘autoethnographic expression’ as shown in Rūdolf Blaumanis’ play.

The Baltic Provinces as Europe’s Internal Others: A History of Dependency

In their introduction to the volume *Readings of the Particular: The Postcolonial in the Postnational*, Anne Holden Rønning and Lene Johannessen argue:

Key elements in colonial and postcolonial discourse and criticism have always involved a focus on belonging, on identity, on expressing, explaining and analyzing present and past dynamics between peoples and cultures. Historically, these considerations arose out of social and political realities of specific times and places, relying heavily on knowledge of the particularities of location and the complex discourses thus refracted. (2007: ix)

Scholars of postcolonial literatures continue to stress the importance of diversity using examples from specific situations in different societies at various phases of their development. These attempts are vitally necessary for the understanding of decolonial moves, as well as for an interpretation of the complexity of interaction among different groups in society. This article will engage with the processes of transculturation in a particular geographical and cultural locality where resemblances to global processes still need to be figured out more comprehensively. I will also discuss the literary representation of the early twentieth century political, economic and cultural specificity of Livland (or Livonia), one of the so-called Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire, which, despite numerous historical changes caused by politically turbulent developments, was at that time still dominated by the colonial German powers whose might stretches back to the twelfth and thirteenth century crusades. The geographical territories of present-day Estonia and Latvia remained under foreign invaders for about seven centuries, even if the power relations during this period changed considerably. Nevertheless, German settlers kept their dominance during the political reign of the crown of Sweden in seventeenth century Livland, and the same nobles continued to rule the province (and its counterparts of Estland/Estonia and Courland) also after its territory was incorporated into the Russian Empire following the events of the Northern War in the eighteenth century.

The Baltic German community was extremely proud of preserving and documenting their historical links. German dominance in the Baltic area was based on power shared by a small group of people, established families that were integrated into a well-organized and territorially particularized network of

corporations.¹ In her comprehensive study of the Baltic German nobility in the nineteenth century, Heide W. Whelan points out that

[t]he term ‘identity crisis,’ so familiar in our modern world, would not have been understood by a Baltic German noble of the early nineteenth-century. Baltic nobles knew exactly where they belonged and who they were. (1999: 29)

A disposition for a high level of personal comfort played a central role in the imagery of a rational and noble life.

[T]hey all shared a common characteristic with colonial masters elsewhere in an inclination toward comfort, indolence, personal gratification, and a social life made possible by a serving and servile population. (Whelan 1999: 36)²

Baltic German self-confidence had a more secure basis than economic dominance alone. Indeed, the Baltic German world outlook relied upon an elaborated system of rules, and was strongly influenced by the general trends in eighteenth century philosophical thought, as well as in the colonial particularity of the Baltic provinces.

As a century of discoveries and travels the Enlightenment shed a new light on an understanding of the world order and pushed European societies into consideration of their own role in the overall pattern. German duchies and their inhabitants felt themselves underrepresented on the global colonial maps, compared with the position of England, France, or Spain. This led to the creation of utopian models dealing with Germans as would-be better colonizers than the actual ones. In accordance with more general ideas of the Enlightenment these models stressed rationality and the role of the mind in ordering society and the world. In her book-length study of the German colonial fantasies in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, Susanne Zantop scrutinizes different colonization models debated and promoted in the literature of the time. She points out that ‘[t]he opposition of good conquistadors (us) and bad conquistadors (them) forms the moral framework within which colonial activity is judged’ (Zantop

¹¹ ‘[T]he future Baltic German nobility met first in a general diet in the fourteenth century and then gradually united into nobiliar corporations, called *Ritterschaften*. The attachment of each *Ritterschaft* to a specific local area promoted bonds of group and corporate loyalty and gave a foundation to claims of a privileged politic role. The essential base for each member of this group was the knightly manor (*Rittergut*). From dominion over the manor grew dominion over the polity, and from both grew a sense of identity that bound each generation to the next’ (Whelan 1999: 13).

² Throughout her book, Whelan traces the similarities and specifics of the Baltic German society in a wider context of colonial relationships. Surprisingly, the point is missed by most authors, including Zantop, who rather grudgingly admits that, ‘[a]lthough European relations are, strictly speaking, not “colonial”’, in the late eighteenth-century German philosophical discourse ‘references to colonial competition and a colonialist terminology suggest that colonialism forms an unconscious frame of reference even for European power politics’ (Zantop 1997: 93).

1997: 26). One of her examples deals with the juxtaposition of the characters of Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoe's famous novel (1722), and Krusoe in the popular German adaptation of this work by Joachim Heinrich Campe (1779).³

A very different, nonviolent, rational colonization, Krusoe's romance with the Carribean island thus replaces and obliterates the failed German conquest(s) in the past as well as the more recent colonial acquisitions by other European nations. As the fairy-tale beginning of the novel already suggested, Krusoe's quest for an island of his own and for a different colonial story rewrites German colonial history – past and future – as myth. (Zantop 1997, 108)

In contrast to the mythical qualities of intellectual and pedagogical generalizations of colonization in regard to non-European parts of the world, German colonialism in the Baltic provinces was at that time a harsh reality. When Johann Gottfried Herder in his *Reflections on the Philosophy of History of Mankind* (1784) blamed the Spaniard's mistreatment of Indians for the latter's supposed 'savagery, passivity, and weakness' (Zantop 1997: 76), his language was consciously or unconsciously recalled in similar arguments by the Baltic German publicist Garlieb Merkel. In his book *The Latvians* (1796) Merkel argued strongly in favor of the abolition of serfdom in the Baltic provinces, not only in order to open the way for better economic conditions, but also because these measures would certainly have a positive impact on the behavior of the natives – and as a consequence improve the productivity of native labor. The Latvians, Merkel suggests, have been pushed into their miserable condition by the ruling elite. Better living conditions would lead the natives to a more ordered existence⁴ (1998: 29).

However harsh the debates, they neither changed the colonial situation and the dominant role of the Baltic Germans in the nineteenth century, nor the class ideology. What gave the Baltic Germans their might, then, was their reliability, as well as their sense of social and moral order. The stronghold of this order was to be found in the structure and fundamental values of family relations.

³ Campe's version, titled *Robinson der Jüngere: ein Lesebuch für Kinder*, was the most popular among a great number of other, many of them earlier, adaptations. It witnessed 117 German editions by 1894 (Zantop 1997: 103).

⁴ In his analysis of work of the Baltic German author August von Kotzebue, Otto-Heinrich Elias notices an important parallel between Merkel's *Die Letten* and Kotzebue's *Die Negerklaven* published the same year and place, Leipzig, in 1796. The play, which deals with colonial conditions, is relatively less frequently noticed in Kotzebue's extensive oeuvre and is also more rarely staged. One of the reasons for that, as Elias suggests, could be the unwillingness of the eighteenth and nineteenth century actresses to make themselves up as a black woman (for the leading role). Alternatively, *Die Negerklaven* has been staged in an adaptation as a story contained within the white race. And, the critic asks rhetorically, what else remains of the play once the exotic surroundings are omitted if not a history of serfdom in Europe? (Elias 2011: 276)

Postcolonial scholars have often identified the gendered character of the encounters between the metropolis and the colony.⁵ However, in the light of Enlightenment-inspired discussions, the sensuality of those encounters provided dangerous allurements that had to be avoided by ‘good’ and orderly colonizers. Here again, Campe’s *Krusoe* provides an alternative: ‘The formation of the young German colonizer is predicated, above all, upon learning self-restraint and manliness vis-à-vis alluring “effeminate” behavior’ (Zantop 1997: 119). The rationality clearly determines also the Baltic German way of life, manifesting itself in society, as well as in family.

The wealthy landowners managed to preserve their privileges intact, despite the early nineteenth century Napoleonic invasion and political and economic changes, including the abolition of serfdom in the provinces in the nineteenth century. The historian Andres Kasekamp summarizes the situation in the provinces towards the middle of the nineteenth century in the following way:

The nobility even managed to consolidate its privileges in subsequent years. With the full codification of Baltic corporate law in 1845, the tsar finally recognized the exclusive right of the nobility to own manor lands. This small group of approximately three hundred noble families, together with a larger group of German burghers in the towns, continued to exercise hegemonic control over the native population. By the mid-nineteenth century, such a rigidly stratified society based entirely on status was unknown elsewhere in Europe. The Baltic Germans constituted less than 7 per cent of the total population of the Baltic provinces but dominated all aspects of their political, social, cultural and economic life, both in the countryside and the towns. (2010: 70)

During the second part of the nineteenth century these patterns of domination were gradually challenged by the politics of the Russian state, especially under tsar Alexander III (1881–1894) whose attempts at Russification of the provinces, as well as the intended centralization of the imperial rules provided a serious threat to the Baltic German community. This was achieved by economic changes which pushed even the conservative aristocratic nobility toward partial adaptation to the conditions of modernity, and by the rising national movements which, according to the analysis provided by Miroslav Hroch, meant attempts at self-manifestation by previously non-dominant social groups in the respective territories (2000: 23).

During the second half of the nineteenth-century, however, the economic development on the continent as well as the increasing pressure from both above

⁵ These can take the form of sexual encounter or sublimate sexual attraction into an Eros of “cultivation” (Zantop 1997, 13). ‘One might say then that the matrimony between the Natural Man and the Natural Woman becomes the ultimate metaphor for the successful colonial encounter, and vice versa: the power relation of colonizer to colonized becomes the model for a successful matrimony’ (Zantop 1999, 61).

(Czarist government) and below (the native population) meant that the fraternal society of the Baltic German nobles experienced inevitable changes.

The relations between the Czarist regime and the Germans in the Baltic provinces became even more troubled after the unification of Germany in 1871, as the rulers of the Russian empire and Slavophile nationalists now seemed to have legitimate doubts about the loyalty of their German citizens.⁶ This move also made service in the imperial military, which had been one of the major occupations of the Baltic Germans, apart from land ownership, more difficult. Among the new requirements for this service was also the knowledge of Russian.

In 1882 Alexander III ordered Senator Nikolai Manasein to inspect the Baltic provinces.⁷ According to the recommendations following this inspection, principal changes were introduced, including the appointment of new Russian governors in the provinces (Kasekamp 2010: 83–84). A decade earlier, in 1868, the Slavophile Iuri Samarin had launched a vigorous attack upon the privileges of the Baltic German community. The following year, Professor Carl Schirren responded with a plea for the preservation of Baltic German traditional ways of life and urged his compatriots to stand fast (Whelan 1999: 209). However, the Baltic nobles increasingly faced competition from the more flexible German burghers living in the cities (especially Riga). The economic stability of the Baltic German noble landowners was also threatened by the necessity of mortgaging their family estates leading to an increase in debts and loss of properties.

One notices a retreat to family as one of the remaining pillars of the existing order. However, changes in this area were inevitable, too. The number of Baltic German marriages diminished, due both to the relatively smaller number of the German population during the last decades of the nineteenth century, as well as economic uncertainty. As a further consequence of this, the birth rate also dropped later in the century.⁸ All spheres of life had thus to be subjugated to a strategy of survival and sustainability. Stability of marriage also meant the sharing of power among a small and closed circle of the provincial nobles, and, therefore, every intended alliance required serious consideration. In an attempt to keep the patriarchal family order intact, it was social suitability that determined the choice of a spouse. The compatibility of the married couple, as repeatedly stressed by careful fathers (and mothers) instructing their sons and daughters, was to be based

⁶ The Baltic Germans were denounced as living ‘in a private world of Baltic privileges and special rights, cut off from the rest of Russia and culturally and intellectually linked with Germany’ (Thaden 1981: 59).

⁷ The senatorial inspection took place between May 5, 1882, and August 31, 1883 (Thaden 1981: 56).

⁸ The number of children per marriage was still considerably high if the whole second part of the nineteenth century is taken into account; however, the average of 4.5 births per marriage (and 3.7 average of those who reached the age of twenty) dropped to about half compared to the early eighteenth century (Whelan 1999: 251). The trend continued with less noble men ready to submit themselves to the tasks of married life.

not on passion but friendship. Romantic love ‘was not a necessary or expected prelude to marriage; preferable was a “heartfelt love of friendship” that could be equated with mutual affection’.⁹ (Whelan 1999: 124)

One of the tasks of these ‘friendly’ marriages was to have and raise children and, according to eighteenth and nineteenth century statistics, the couples generally succeeded. Large families secured the prolongation of the rule of the nobles; and the Baltic German aristocracy generally tried to stay as conservative and closed as possible, not only in their relations to the native population, but also in regard to their less distinguished and less wealthy compatriots in the provinces.

The developments described above suggest that, despite their attempts to preserve the existing order, the Baltic German nobility of the late nineteenth century was in many ways different from earlier times, even if in everyday life these changes were marked by minor details. It is against this background of social transformation, that had its impact on the German as well as the Latvian (and Estonian) population of Livland, that I will discuss the Latvian writer Rūdolf Blaumanis’ play *In the Fire*.

Autoethnographic Expression in Rūdolf Blaumanis’ drama *In The Fire*

In my discussion of Blaumanis’ play, I deal with the process of how the author tackles native society’s dependency upon the social and cultural traditions established by Baltic Germans while trying to detect those traces which changing social conditions leave on people’s minds and deeds, even if those latter are often determined by unconscious impulses. In the discussion of two of the principal – and mutually juxtaposed – protagonists of Blaumanis’ drama, I link these characters to the images of smoke and fire. The images mentioned are, in my opinion, illustrative of how the actions of a German landlord, and a Latvian maid working at his manor, are determined by, and become representative of, their respective backgrounds and social context.

Both characters hardly exchange a line during the play, supportive of my argument of the detached social spaces they inhabit. In fact, the landlord and the maid occupy almost completely separate mental and physical territories, even if their worlds literally intersect, since it is the maid’s daily task to clean the nobleman’s rooms. On the plot level the drama deals with the maid’s marriage prospects as she currently has several suitors and is fond of one of them. The landlord is not directly involved in the development of these events. Still, the landlord and the maid are linked historically and epistemologically due to

⁹ Clearly, the story had its own ‘others’. Thus Elisa von der Recke, reflecting upon her troubled marriage, noticed in a letter to her friend that ‘many peasant boys who watch the geese and pigs look like my husband’ (translated and quoted in Whelan 1999: 123). But this reality does not diminish the regulating role of the general pattern.

underlying social structures and their historical dynamics. I see them as representatives of different social, national, and gender groups.

The social position and personality of the landlord is to a great extent defined by that of his ancestors, the Baltic German nobles. The appearance of the landlord, fragmentary as it is, both manifestly and latently mirrors many of the trends discussed above. As the landlord appears in three out of five acts of Blaumanis' play, my discussion is linked to specific acts dividing these appearances into three corresponding facets of the landlord's personality – that of modernizer, ruler, and colonizer. The landlord is first encountered briefly in the second act of the play that takes place in the room of the maid's mother, the laundress. He comes here to notify his steward about a defect in the stove that causes disturbances to the guests of the manor. Apparently, as soon as a fire is lit in the stove the billiard room is filled with smoke. A little later we also hear an electric bell ring as the (by now offstage) landlord calls his servant to serve at table.

What are we to make of these details? First, we notice that luxuries of modern life are not alien to the landlord. Large social gatherings in the nobles' homes were not so frequent in the Baltic provinces due to considerable distances separating the manors, a relatively small concentration of people, bad roads, as well as the daily business of supervising peasant activities. However, Blaumanis' landlord has not spared efforts to create a billiard room for amusement. In the context of the generally hard times, this perhaps serves as an indication that he is not so badly off financially, an assumption indirectly confirmed later in the play when the landlord prepares to leave the estate for a short visit to the city. We are informed by a remark early in the play that the estate is located close to Riga and, as the landlord is ready to leave, a servant informs him that the train is due to arrive in several minutes. As indicated by economic historians of the period, location close to the city as an important market space, as well as the potentialities provided by the accessibility of the railway (a major innovation in the provinces in the late nineteenth century), often served as indicators of the specific estate's prosperity (Whelan 1999: 300). The electric bell is a further sign of modern times.

The next act focuses on the landlord as ruler, as now we encounter him in his studio in successive conversations with servants who receive orders as the landlord prepares to leave. We see him involved in the discussion of even minor housekeeping details, despite the presence of the steward whose tasks presumably were to solve at least some of them, for example the smoke already mentioned early in the play. We even hear of certain quarrels among the staff, which underscores the impression of instability. Upon his departure, the landlord asks and is provided with one of his revolvers, another clear indication of unruly times.

Together with details of specific daily business, the author also provides a description of the studio. Here, on the landlord's desk, is a bust of Bismarck and, on the wall, the map of Livland. Both details provide fascinating ground for

speculation in the context of the social and historical observations above. First, the loyalty demonstrated to Bismarck and the German Reich clearly indicates a shift in the previously dominant adherence to the Russian Empire characteristic of the provinces. It is a sign of the new orientation, which was frightening to the tsar and his Slavophile countrymen, even if the historical reality points to the relative passivity of late nineteenth and early twentieth century German politics in regard to their Baltic compatriots;¹⁰ possibly because Bismarck, who was at pains to preserve stable relationships with the Russian monarch, was rather cautious concerning the official policy toward the Baltic Germans.¹¹ However, Blaumanis clearly indicates that it is the colonially possessed territory that dominates the intellectual horizon of the landlord as a nobleman and a ruler.

But he is going to be challenged even on those grounds. In the same act, we also see the landlord in a conversation with one of the aspiring native farmers, Akmentiņš, who has come to visit the landlord with a request. As the leader of the local native community, Akmentiņš asks permission to hold a song festival in the parkland surrounding the manor. Grudgingly, and pointing to a certain insurgency that had happened the previous year, the landlord feels obliged to submit to the request, as Akmetiņš promises to take personal responsibility for the event. The festival in turn provides the background for the events of the following act, where the landlord is confronted with his position as a colonizer and a foreigner.

One of the scenes in the fourth act focuses on the landlord in conversation with Akmentiņš, probably one of the few natives with whom the landlord is ready to engage in such kind of leisure conversation. But the tones of the dialogue are politically charged. Looking across the mass of people who have gathered for the song festival, the landlord asks the openly provocative question as to whom all these people owe their existence and relative prosperity. To which Akmentiņš, instead of the expected praise for the Baltic German noble community (the 'good' colonizers), stresses the importance of self-respect and the hard work of their own forefathers which had helped his compatriots to survive (Blaumanis 1958: 237). Thus through direct impressions and metaphorical generalizations the landlord is confronted with the rising tide of native people who are on the verge of challenging the centuries old domination of the German Baltic nobles.

One individual among those previously disdained people, nameless serfs only several decades ago, is the maid of the manor, Kristīne, who is also the main

¹⁰ The unification of Germany in 1871, according to the Baltic German historian Reinhard Wittram, created a considerable amount of enthusiasm among the aristocracy of the Baltic provinces (Wittram 1973: 195). On the other hand, 'the new German Empire, which was conducting its own Germanization policies, showed no interest in the fate of Baltic Germans; in fact, as Baltic Germans were to discover again and again, the Germans regarded them as Russians' (Whelan 1999: 228).

¹¹ In the following decades, many of the Baltic Germans in fact fought against their compatriots in the First World War.

protagonist in Blaumanis' drama. Throughout the play, Kristīne is torn between contrasting forces, reason and sentiment, rationality and emotionality, and it is her final choice – of her future husband but, as I will argue, one with much farther reaching implications – which defines her future. Rationality has its hold over Kristīne during the first two acts of the play. She is afraid that her fate could be linked to the lively groom, Edgars, who, however, is notoriously famous for his bohemian ways. Even if she is secretly fond of him, and these feelings are shared, Kristīne submits to her mother's rationally motivated demand not to consider the possibility of this supposedly misalliance, but instead draw closer to another of her suitors, the considerably better off Akmentiņš.¹²

However, the third act – which, according to the ideas of Gustav Freitag, the nineteenth century German author and theorist whose suggestions on formal matters Blaumanis followed closely, provides the climax of a play – leads to a sudden emotional outburst which explodes in opening the sensuality of Kristīne's relationship with Edgars. The setting of this act, that of the landlord's studio is of principal importance. It is in this studio that Edgars encounters Kristīne after the landlord's departure. Initially, she tries to avoid him, and in the process she runs through the (backstage) doors covered by a curtain; as the curtain is torn off, a majestic hall with mirrors reflecting the sunset suddenly opens to the gaze of the protagonists as well as the spectators. The long suppressed outburst of feelings takes place in the very rooms from which sensuality has been expelled both figuratively, as the centuries long codex of behavior and the explicitly rational foundations of marriage, and literally, as is confirmed by the landlord's bachelor status.

We can also trace the importance of the build up to this crucial scene. In the previous, second act of the play, Edgars addresses Kristīne saying that 'all that about our friendship and so on – is nothing but lies. We clearly know that we love each other' (Blaumanis 1958: 212). Even if at this point, which is still marked by a certain rationality of considerations, Kristīne does not overtly deny the suggestion, she holds her passion within bounds, in the tradition marked by the strict manners of the Baltic Germans, and also imposed by the advice and experience of her own mother. However, by the end of the third act the fire of Kristīne's and Edgars' passion is impossible to smother any further. Mimicking the possible but underdeveloped delights of the ruling class, in a deeply emotional and sensual outburst the two subalterns experience the pleasure of their encounter in the glorious surroundings of the manor hall, appropriating it in the same – and still not quite the same – way as their master.

But the drama does not end here, and neither is its message conveyed by the intensity of personal relationships alone. There are two further turns in the

¹² One of the arguments of Kristīne's mother is that she herself has been unhappy in her marriage, the disasters of which were caused by that typical vice of 'a native', the excessive use of alcohol.

development of the plot as Kristīne first abandons Edgars and opts to ally herself with Akmentiņš; and then, in the final twist, returns to Edgars as her true love. These changes should also be explained as marking Kristīne's path toward 'autoethnographic expression' in the context of specific scenes and the general message of the play.

During the native song festival in the fourth act, Akmentiņš brings out his qualities as a representative of the rising self-esteem of the local population. He does not shun an open conflict with the steward of the manor who tries to get rid of an unwanted visitor; due to Akmentiņš' intervention the attempt to expel the man fails. In regard to the social context of the play, this episode adds to the mounting opposition to the ruling class and confirmation of the rights of the local population. This was also taken up earlier in the conversation between Akmentiņš and the landlord. It is not even important that Kristīne in fact does not meet Akmentiņš before the end of the fourth act. Her temporary change of mind is caused by the improper behavior of her fiancé, Edgars, who during the festival, despite his promises, goes back to his drinking habits. This marks such a contrast to her own momentary happiness, to her acquired openness to the surrounding world, and to the general atmosphere of the festivity, that in an unexpected move Kristīne addresses her long-term suitor and a man of manners, Akmentiņš, and accepts his earlier proposal.

Her final reversal is reserved for the fifth, and last, act of the play. What happens to Kristīne here is again subtly motivated by the particular location. As she tries on her bridal gown – her marriage to Akmentiņš is expected in a couple of day's time – she is advised by her near-confidante, the mistress of the manor, to take a look at herself in the mirror. And as the offstage mirrors turn out to be the same ones, in the landlord's rooms, where she earlier saw herself so ingeniously happy after the appearance of Edgars, a final twist takes place and Kristīne follows her true feelings. 'I can only love', she confirms at the very end of the play (Blaumanis 1958: 255); and this allows us to turn once again back to the title of this article.

Instead of any attempt to define her behavior by the standards of others, even if she complies with suggested models at some points, the only manner in which Kristīne can express her 'autoethnographic' personality is by following her own path, guided by her emotions.¹³ In terms of the rising movement of the subaltern people, inherent in the story, her alliance with Akmentiņš may even seem not only empirically but also ideologically sound. However, that choice would be much inspired by the rational Baltic German pattern of decision-

¹³ We can link the solution provided by the play to the notion of nonviolent resistance crucial for the Baltic peoples throughout the twentieth century. 'As Baltic artists reinterpret and adapt the lives of their warrior heroes, if violence continues to fade while empathy for the heroes' adversaries increases, and if female heroes continue to oppose and quell traditionally masculine violence, we humans have reason for a small dose of optimism' (Smidchens 2007: 508).

making. The importance of the characters of Kristīne and Akmentiņš, as well as the distinction between them could also be characterized in terms of two different ways of manifestation of national narratives, the pedagogical and the performative (Bhabha 1990: 299). The brilliance of the play is demonstrated by the fact that each of these two characters follows his (or her) own choice. Whereas Akmentiņš challenges the Baltic German rule with his example of economic success, Kristīne's emotionality (clearly on the performative side) undermines the identity models constructed by the colonizer's ordered way of life. Contrary to the landlord who remains emotionally unmoved and can only detect smoke in his rooms, Kristīne in her passion toward Edgars represents fire. And it is in her choice, with its subconscious motivations also firmly rooted in the historical context, that we detect the most profound 'ability to contribute to human freedom' (Chrisman 2004: 187).

In the words of Stanley Cavell, human actions can be put into practice actively and passively. Paradoxically enough, he stresses that passive actions are those done through will, as the will is commanded by oneself, perhaps driven. But there is an alternative to that. 'For any performance or deed can be done through will or through grace' (1979: 384). It is this latter kind which makes an action priceless.

References

- Bhabha, Homi. 1990. 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of Modern Nation.' *Nation and Narration*. London & New York: Routledge: 291–322.
- Blaumanis, Rūdolfs. 1958. Ugunī. *Kopotī raksti*. 5. sēj. Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība: 175–255.
- Cavell, Stanley. 1973. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford & New York: Clarendon Press & Oxford University Press.
- Chrisman, Laura. 2004. Nationalism and postcolonial studies. Lazarus, Neil (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 183–198.
- Elias, Otto-Heinrich. 2011. August von Kotzebue als politischer Dichter. Bosse, Heinrich, Elias, Otto-Heinrich, Taterka, Thomas (Hg.) *Baltische Literaturen in der Goethezeit*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 255–289.
- Gallagher, Catherine, Greenblatt, Stephen. 2000. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hroch, Miroslav. 2000. *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kasekamp, Andres. 2010. *A History of the Baltic States*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2011. 'Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique—An Introduction.' *Transmodernity* (Fall): 1–15.
- Merkel, Garlieb Helwig. 1998. *Die Letten*. Hg. von Thomas Taterka. Wedemark: Harro v. Hirshheydt.
- Mignolo, Walter. 2011. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Plath, Ulrike. 2011. *Esten und Deutsche in den baltischen Provinzen Russlands: Fremdheitskonstruktionen, Lebenswelten, Kolonialphantasien 1750–1850*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 2008. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge.
- Rønning, Anne Holden, Johannessen, Lene (eds.). 2007. *Readings of the Particular: The Postcolonial in the Postnational*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.
- Smidchens, Guntis. 2007. 'National Heroic Narratives in the Baltics as a Source for Nonviolent Political Action.' *Slavic Review* 66, no. 3 (Fall): 484–508.
- Thaden, Edward C. (ed.) 1981. *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855–1914*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Zantop, Susanne. 1997. *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Whelan, Heide W. 1999. *Adapting to Modernity: Family, Caste and Capitalism among the Baltic German Nobility*. Köln & Weimar & Wien: Böhlau.
- Wittram, Reinhard. 1973. *Baltische Geschichte*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.